Tourism is the world’s largest and fastest-growing service industry and has the potential to contribute to economic growth and poverty reduction, in particular in low-income developing countries. The sector’s capacity to generate employment and income owing to its backward and forward linkages makes it important for economic diversification and economic growth. For a number of COMESA member states, tourism has become the most important productive sector in terms of contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), employment and foreign exchange earnings. In COMESA island countries (Seychelles, Madagascar, Mauritius, Comoros) contributes to at about 25% of their GDP and more than half of their export earnings. In mixed economies like Kenya, Egypt also contributes to approximately 12% GDP and about 20% of export revenue.

On the other hand, backbone services such as Information Communications Technology (ICT) and telecommunications services are gaining an increasing importance in facilitating trade, and have gradually become major determinants of performance and competitiveness of any economy. Evidence shows that network and ICT driven economies have advanced their productivity and improved entrepreneurship, social development and transformation by improving access to basic services, enhancing connectivity, and creating employment opportunities, among other things. However, similar to most developing economies, COMESA is a net exporter of communication services with total exports of an average of US$ 2 billion. Countries like Kenya, Egypt and Mauritius are leading in terms of internet penetration and ICT innovation and technology development. It is not surprising that the same countries are also advancing in most sectors of their economies, particularly in tourism. As such tourism and ICT have become some of the most essential services sector for the region, but the merger between the two largely remains untapped. Tourism is an information intensive sector and ICT are a key driver for developing countries in organizing and marketing their tourism products. In most developed economies, online tourism sales account for as high as 50% of the transactions. Even for business and organisations, ICTs are becoming a key determinant of competitiveness and productivity, allowing the business to increase its market share. The impact of ICT on businesses relate to the facilitation of communication with organizational stakeholders, serving as an effective sales channel, providing an effective platform for engaging in marketing and others. For consumers, ICTs empower them to identify, customize and purchase tourism products globally in a more facilitative and effective manner.

E- Business has led to the development of comprehensive web portals that include booking and transaction facilities thus promoting the opportunity to increase sales and to generate more revenue into a local economy. Furthermore, new technology applications and social media platforms allow consumers to easily share information and research ratings on destination, quality of service in hotels and restaurants; thereby bringing them close to the market in a click of a button.
Tourism and ICT Statistics

The COMESA trade in services remains low within the bloc recording only US$ 38 million worth of exports in 2013, though accounting for a growth rate of 62 percent from US$ 14.6 million in 2000. Like most developing countries, COMESA is a net exporter of communication services with total exports of US$ 2 billion.

Travel and tourism services remain largely unexploited in the region. According to COMSTATS, Exports of travel services grew by 15% in 2014 over 2013. However, there has been a marked decline for Egypt. According to World Travel and Tourism Council, the travel and tourism sector contributed to 56.5% to Seychelles GDP, generated more than half of their export earnings in 2013, and is among the main employers. The UNWTO 2015 Annual Report highlights the average growth for travel and tourism services has been 5% for most of the regions, except for Africa where there has been a 3% decrease in tourist arrivals. It therefore, becomes imperative to accelerate initiatives such as ICT readiness to promote the growth of the tourism industry.

On the other hand, communication services are among the fast growing services sectors in the region. The growth and the development of this sector vary across countries, with countries like Egypt, Seychelles, Kenya and Mauritius leading in terms of internet penetration and mobile density. According to 2013 ITU statistics, half of the population in Egypt and Seychelles and 39% in both Kenya and Mauritius were individuals using Internet. In addition, in Seychelles, Mauritius and Egypt, all inhabitants had at least 1 mobile cellular subscription. However, the region needs to develop better infrastructure and regulations if it wants to promote connectivity and upscale its performance compared to global levels.

Communication Services Trade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>COMESA Communication Services Exports (US$ thousands)</th>
<th>COMESA Communication Services Imports (US$ thousands)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2,436,471</td>
<td>1,163,804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>1,607,484</td>
<td>904,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1,675,044</td>
<td>728,696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1,649,314</td>
<td>754,746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1,857,207</td>
<td>775,790</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Key Constraints

There are a number of constraints that will have to be met for us to bridge the digital divide and fully take advantage of ICTs and services for tourism development and trade.

Making ICT and e-development strategies an integral part of policy planning is now essential in order to support the necessary human and physical infrastructure and to introduce and adopt measures to ensure equitable access and widespread capability to make maximum use of ICT's.

The positive effect of ICT’s on the tourism industry in a developing country depends on a national enabling ICT environment that relies on multiple factors including:

- **Access;** Effective and high-speed ICT infrastructure and software applications in the tourism and hospitality industry are crucial for tourism development
- **Infrastructure;** The need to ensure the development of ICT infrastructure across the whole country. Some of the tourist attractions may be in remote places but will still need
connectivity is this one key consideration that tourist will have when making bookings.

- Legal Framework: One of the key constraints for tourism stakeholders is the ability to make and receive online payment, which is a key aspect of e-tourism.
- Business Readiness: Enterprises should also invest in ICT applications and technology. This also includes listing their businesses on some of the key social platforms and tourism applications.

- Public Private Partnerships: Government can work together with the private sector to identify and include tourism niche products in national tourism development plans that can be easily and cost effectively marketed and managed using ICT’s, in order to increase the attractiveness, competitiveness and uniqueness of the destination. In a number of developed countries, the government plays an essential role not just in policy but also in the marketing of a number of their tourist destinations.

CBC Approach

The 1st COMESA Business Council Sustainable Tourism Development Forum in 2012 adopted COMESA Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy and recognized the need for strengthening coalitions and linkages amongst the private sector for development of competitive tourism. Sustainable Tourism Development is underscored by the following:

- Minimizing the negatives of tourism on society and the environment,
- Maximizing tourism’s positive and creative contribution to local communities, the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, and the quality of life of hosts and visitors.

The Strategy further underscores the importance of ICT as complementary to tourism development. The World Economic Forum Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index 2015 identifies ICT readiness as one of the key pillars for measuring tourism competitiveness and development. According to the Index, most COMESA countries rank in the bottom half on ICT readiness and in overall on tourism competitiveness. Whilst most Sub-Saharan African countries are vast with natural and cultural resources, longstanding challenges like ICT readiness, infrastructure deficiencies, unfriendly business environments and visa regime remain a key impediment to the development of the tourism sector.

The 1st COMESA ICT Services Industries Public-Private Dialogue in 2016 underscored the need for equitable access to ICT infrastructure to enable businesses in all sectors to take advantage of ICT in improving their competitiveness. It further, implored the need to facilitate the uptake of ICT by SMEs and businesses in various complementary sectors like tourism as necessary for the growth of the businesses, and promoting regional supply chains.

Indeed, E-tourism strategies should be integrated within the broader framework of national ICT Policies and within businesses strategies across the whole tourism supply chain.

In 2017, the focus will be on strengthening linkages between the ICT and Tourism sectors. This includes organization of regular consultative virtual platforms where we can share knowledge with tourism stakeholders on ICT strategies and tools that they can utilize to advance their businesses. National business dialogues will also allow ICT and other complementary sectors to come together and share knowledge on ICT best practices and the use of technology for business competitiveness.